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ABSTRACT

Those who warn that the United States is handicapped by a state of international illiteracy are concerned both that Americans are unable to communicate in other languages and that most are unprepared to operate with sensitivity in cross-cultural situations. Culture refers to the view of the world shared by members of a group, the patterns of behavior deriving from that view, and the utilitarian and expressive forms evolving from both. For many years, foreign language departments concentrated on presenting culture as events of history in the context of art, music, and literature. The profession now seems committed to teaching the sociological aspects of culture as well as traditional civilization content, focusing on language as a manifestation of culture. The most valuable benefits from studying another culture are humility, awareness of one's own culture, and the understanding that difference is not a negative quality. The foreign language profession is currently working to better define the goals of cultural education. Materials for cultural instruction should be context-rich, experience-based, and have the foreign language as their focus. Despite the large amount of time needed to teach both language and culture, the two are best taught together, holistically, in order to achieve international understanding. (MSE)

ERIC Clearinghouse on
Languages and Linguistics

Q & A

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Prepared by Genelle Morain

November, 1986

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The Role of Culture in Foreign Language Education

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Those who warn that the United States is handicapped by a state of "international illiteracy" have a twofold concern: most Americans are unable to communicate in any language other than their own; and most Americans are unprepared to operate with sensitivity in cross-cultural situations.

What Is Meant by Culture?

The term *culture* includes the view of the world shared by members of a group, the patterns of behavior which derive from that view, and the utilitarian and expressive forms which evolve from both. Tangible aspects of culture range from the inspiring (a soaring cathedral) to the mundane (false teeth soaking in a cup). Intangible aspects of culture include a people's values, ideas, and dreams, as well as the expression of these in law, custom, story and song. To complicate the tasks involved in understanding a culture, tangible aspects often express the intangible, such as a reed basket woven in the form of a woman's breast because it is used to gather berries that offer life-giving nutrients. Likewise, intangible aspects, such as a culture's obsession with staying young, influence the character of its tangible artifacts, such as face creams and exercycles. The complex, infinitely dimensional nature of culture creates problems for those who wish to learn it and for those who must teach it.

How Has the Language Profession Approached the Teaching of Culture?

For many years foreign language departments concentrated on presenting the "civilizing" aspects of culture--the events of history marching in brisk, chronological order before a rich tapestry of art, music, and literature. The content was divorced from language study itself. In fact, the civilization course was often an upper division offering, frequently taught in English for the benefit of the student in comparative literature.

A second area of culture--that dealing with the patterns and values of everyday life--was, until recently, virtually ignored in language classes. There were several reasons for this: the contours of customs change; the reflection of values in daily activities may be obscure; attitudes are mutable; and paralinguistic cues are often exquisitely subtle. While textbook writers could include fine arts culture via neat reading passages and photos of old chateaux, they were unsure how to pin down the more elusive sociological culture. Furthermore, most language teachers had received their own preparation in the culture-as-civilization years, and while they could distinguish a Roman arch from a Gothic, they felt ill-equipped to present language in a sociolinguistic matrix.

In the mid-eighties, however, as the language teaching profession turned toward proficiency testing, an examination of what constitutes communicative competence underscored the close ties between language and culture. It became clear that a course which disregards culture can produce students who use the correct grammatical forms of a minimally expressive vocabulary to convey meaning, but that such a course is sterile. Likewise, those who complete such a course often lack the motivation to continue language study and have little desire to interact with members of the foreign culture. On the other hand, courses which include the sociolinguistic factors influencing what is proper to say to whom under what circumstances, with which emotional overtones, and with what nonverbal behavior, must of necessity highlight the human dimension of language. For students in these courses, people on paper do not suffice; these students are eager to try their language skills in real-life communicative situations.

The profession now seems committed to teaching the sociological aspects of culture as well as the traditional civilization content. Additionally, in the study of both, the spotlight is on language as a manifestation of culture.

What Are the Benefits of Studying a Foreign Culture?

Perhaps the most valuable benefit from studying another culture is humility. While all countries tend toward ethnocentrism, the geographic isolation of America and the growing importance of the English language have given us a disproportionate sense of power. To study a foreign language and culture is to become aware that other people experience the world in different textures, colors, and fragrances. It is to realize that while all people share

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similar emotions, what gives rise to those emotions varies widely from one culture to another. The expression of emotion, in nonverbal as well as verbal channels, may be arrestingly different from one's own mode of expression. To study another culture is to learn that what is logical in one culture--what makes sense in terms of reason and justice--may be totally alien to the reasonable expectations of members of another culture. Most difficult of all, perhaps, is the realization that even the inalienable constants such as Time and Truth come in different shapes and sizes across cultural boundaries.

To study another culture's values is to become aware of one's own. American culture, for example, rewards the person who gets out and *does* something, such as selling real estate, or designing computers, or winning lawsuits. It does not much reward, on the other hand, those who strum a guitar or write poetry. Our work ethic is most appreciated when it results in something material. We like and trust the things we can touch and see. The study of another culture, however, brings fresh perspectives and the awareness that in other societies the scholar, the artist, and the visionary are often revered as the supreme contributors.

To study another culture is to gain the understanding that "different" is not a negative category. In the initial stages of language learning, it is perhaps unwise to stress the differences between cultures for fear of engendering negative attitudes. Perceived similarities help to form positive impressions and enable students to empathize with members of another culture. Nonetheless, critical differences in perceptions and expectations across cultures do exist, and students should not be shielded from them. On the contrary, students become aware of who they are and what they believe only through understanding how they differ from others, and it is only through an exploration of these differences that students learn to value the unique contribution made by others. A study of foreign cultures helps students embrace, not erase, the right to be different.

What Culture Skills and Understandings Should a Language Student Possess?

The goals of language teaching as related to culture are ambitious, involving as they must, both the sociological and the civilization aspects of culture. The American Council on The Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the various American Associations of Teachers (AATs), and many state foreign language curriculum specialists are currently at work refining these goals. Couched in the form of "student proficiencies," cultural objectives are difficult to capture in a nutshell. As a point of departure, one might consider the following.

Students of a foreign language and culture should:

- be able to say and do the culturally acceptable thing in ordinary social situations and in certain extraordinary situations;

- know why these behaviors are important to members of the culture and how they fit harmoniously into the culture's system of values;

- be able to interpret the visual elements of the culture (signs, symbols, objects, environmental factors, and nonverbal behavior) in the same way as do members of the culture;

- be able to evaluate generalizations made by and about the members of the target culture. (This requires an awareness of stereotyping and of the distortion in perspective caused by prejudice. It also requires an awareness of the similarities and differences of world view between the student's own and the target culture.)

- know how to keep growing in cultural understanding through interaction with native speakers, participation in cultural events, intelligent appraisal of the mass media, and enjoyment of literature and the arts.

How Should Teachers Present Cultural Material?

Since the 1960's, a generous number of inventories, models, and frameworks have been proposed to help systematize the presentation of cultural information. In addition, practitioners have created a colorful array of techniques to use in presenting cultural content in the language class (see Omaggio, 1986). In spite of these good efforts, however, neither teachers nor the textbooks upon which they rely have found it easy to put together the bits and pieces of culture in such a way that students may perceive the overall design. Certainly the limited time allotted to the study of foreign language accounts for some of the difficulty. Imparting such understanding, however, is less a matter of time than of intent. Although American students spend years studying the geography, history, and literature of their own country, few can discuss the themes of American culture or cite examples of how societal attitudes are reflected in daily life. Needed today are teaching materials whose authors have chosen one excellent cultural model and then, step by step, level by level, systematically involve the students in those aspects of language and society which illuminate the grand design of the culture.

Such materials must offer a context-rich, experience-based approach with the foreign language itself as the central focus. Students need to be given the opportunity to learn the *sturdy vocabulary* needed to perform routine social functions, such as how to purchase a ripe melon, get the car serviced, request information; as well as the *emotive vocabulary* needed for dimensional participation in a culture, such as how to offer condolences, express joy, pay a compliment, recognize sarcasm, and communicate displeasure. The approach must provide a variety of learning activities in both the cognitive and affective areas, structured to involve as many of the sensory channels as possible. Role play, interviews, and dramatic

simulations plunge students into using language to express their own ideas and feelings. Sophisticated media bring the sights and sounds of the foreign language into the classroom. Field trips take the students out to interact with native speakers in authentic settings. Materials present aspects of popular culture, fine arts culture, and folklore. They help students acquire the skills needed not only to recognize stereotypes, but to evaluate them, so that they do not remain dependent on the judgment of others in formulating their own cultural understandings. A gradually forming sense of the totality of the culture--its themes, its assumptions, its values, its folk ideas--and an awareness of how these are expressed through the patterns of behavior and the creative products of the people must be built into all levels of instruction.

Would It Be More Efficient to By-Pass Language and Concentrate on Culture?

The ETS Oral Proficiency Testing Manual reveals the dismaying fact that at least 720 hours of classroom instruction under optimal conditions are required for a learner with average aptitude to reach an oral proficiency level of 2+ in French or Spanish. Even longer periods are needed for more difficult languages.

Considering this enormous expenditure of energy, it is tempting to conclude that the student who foresees only sporadic international involvement might be better served in by-passing language instruction and concentrating on the acquisition of cultural expertise. To the time-conscious American businessman, for example, this is a deceptively attractive solution. Indeed, few colleges of business in the United States require that their graduates demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language. Instead, workshops are proliferating in the business community which are designed to impart cultural understandings to company personnel destined for overseas assignments. Here, in a relatively short time, students receive intensive instruction for coping with culture shock. Basically, they are asked to role-play critical cross-cultural scenes and memorize a list of cultural do's and don'ts. Certainly acquisition of this kind of surface understanding is superior to the present state of optimistic ignorance in which most of our overseas representatives venture forth. Nonetheless, can any amount of cross-cultural acumen compensate for being unable to discuss plans and express simple friendship in the client's own language?

The "either-language-or-culture" solution described above may be better understood by imagining three sets of strangers. The first two strangers, who share only an understanding of language, are like robots with functional mouths and ears, but neither brains nor heart. The next two strangers, who know each other's culture but have no common language, are equipped with brains and heart, but, frustratingly, have neither mouth nor ears. Only the last set of strangers, with both language skills and cultural knowledge, can communicate as whole human beings--with ears to hear, mouths to express, brains to interpret, and hearts to empathize. Surely the "whole human" approach is our long-range best hope for achieving international understanding, and is worth whatever expenditure of time and energy its implementation requires.

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